

# **THE RED CROSS KNIGHT DEGREES.**

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## PREAMBLE:

Brother Knights, the importance of 'historical accuracy' in our ritual- work, (as in the V.S.L.) is not as significant as the moral teachings derived from the hidden symbolism and every degree in Freemasonry, without exception, conveys to us an important message. They also portray to us, certain 'illustrious characters' who have set an example for us to follow.

Furthermore the work in every Degree is to serve us, as a guide, for a spiritually richer way of life and these "Degrees of the Captivity", which include 'Knight of the Sword' - (with its Recitative), 'Knight of the East', and 'Knight of the-East and West' are no exception. Each one of these Degrees teaches us its own individual lesson. They portray the great personalities, who left us a heritage of courage, zeal, perseverance and a guide for perfect leadership and above all, a lesson in true and absolute tolerance, and fair play.

To start with, the stories of these Degrees appear to be more Biblically based than any other known to me. For, whilst there may be some slight 'artistic license' taken with the settings, actual events depicted in each of the points CAN be found in the Old Testament, and the 'Apocrypha' as well as in history textbooks.

Now, in the 1st Point, we find 'Cyrus the Great', King of the Persian Empire, (who has just recently captured the whole of Babylonia), presiding over his Council of 'Knights of the Sword' in the beautiful city of Babylon. Sheshbazzar (and not Zerubbabel), appears before the throne of Cyrus, with a request to grant the Jews permission to return to Jerusalem, the city of their fathers, in order to rebuild their 'Holy Temple', and the Holy City.

Cyrus was probably the first and only monarch in the history of mankind, who placed the welfare of his 'subject-peoples' above the pomp and grandeur of his exalted station. He was a just and benevolent ruler, who granted freedom to all those subjects who came under his control. And the "Decree of Cyrus" (releasing the Jewish people from exile) may be considered as of equal, if not greater importance, than the 'Magna Carta', or the U.S. 'Declaration of Independence', or even the United Nations Charter, granting 'the Freedoms' to all mankind. Now, while the Royal Arch Degree deals with the building of the Second Temple, (the Temple of Zerubbabel) these, the 'Degrees of the Captivity' explain the difficulties, and behind-the-scene activities connected with the building work itself, and, what is more significant, with the restoration of a partially independent 'State' of Israel (or, more correctly State of Judah).

## BACKGROUND:

Bro. Knights; a very brief background, leading up to these Degrees, is as follows: About 300 years after the death of King Solomon, i.e. in the year 625 BCE, the Chaldeans (known to us as the Babylonians), began the building of the

huge Babylonian Empire. Nabopolassar, who was Nebuchadnezzar's father, and Emperor of the Chaldeans, or Babylonians, had 'annexed' Syria and the Holy Land, including Jerusalem to his Babylonian Empire. But, Nabopolassar was getting on in years.

He therefore appointed his able warrior-son, Nebuchadnezzar, as head of his armies. Then one day, while Nebuchadnezzar was away fighting, in the far West and South, news came to him of his father's death (in about 604 BCE). He hurried back to Babylon, and, while he was busily engaged in the affairs of his Government, most of his 'vassal-states' including Judah, were left in peace. Deceived by this temporary lull, the Jews, under King Jehoiakim, revolted and refused to pay any further tribute, (i.e.: taxes), to their new overlord, Nebuchadnezzar. To suppress this revolt, the Babylonians returned to Judah with a huge army and, as mentioned in the Super Excellent Master Degree, Jehoiakim the King of Judah, surrendered and his 18-year-old son, Jehoiachin, was placed on the throne, for three months only, when he and his family were exiled to Babylon, together with many of the nobility, artisans, and all the 'men of war' in 597 BCE.

Nebuchadnezzar then placed Mattaniah, (the uncle of Jehoiachin), on the throne, as a puppet King. He also changed his name to ZEDEKIAH (which signifies: "the Justice of Jehohah"). But in the 9th year of his reign, (and against the advice of the Prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah), Zedekiah also revolted against the King of Babylon. The mighty Babylonian army soon returned, and besieged the Holy City of Jerusalem. After a long and bitter siege, lasting many months, King Zedekiah managed to escape from the city, by an underground tunnel which was part of the original King Solomon's stone quarries near the road to Jericho. The entrance to the quarries is therefore called "The Cave of Zedekiah". You see, some of these original 'Royal Quarries' were virtually underneath the King's Palace, and extending North from Mt. Mariah, towards the Damascus Gate. During the building of King Solomon's Temple, whilst cutting the stones for the Temple in an underground Quarry, they, at the same time, cut a tunnel, which led directly from the Palace gardens, to a cave near the road to Jericho, thus providing a means of escape in case of a siege, of the City of Jerusalem.

Zedekiah was soon recaptured, near the plains of Jericho. He was taken in chains to Babylon, where, after cruel tortures, he eventually died in a prison cell. And Zedekiah was the last King of Judah. The remnants of the defenders fought on, in defence of the Holy City. The enemy however, finally pierced the fortifications, entered the City, and torched all the important buildings, including the King's Palaces, and the Solomon's Temple. Thus, in the year 587 BCE, after standing for about 375 years, the beautiful Temple of Solomon was burned to the ground, an alarming symbol of the end of Judah. What treasures were left, were carried off to Babylon. Note: (Following the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, there is no further reference made, in Biblical or any other history, regarding the fate of Israel's most revered treasure, 'the Ark of the Covenant' about which tradition is silent and only rumours persist.)

Most of the survivors were taken into exile in Babylonia and the captives fully expected to be annihilated there. They were instead, spared, and settled down to a more-or-less normal life, in their adopted home in exile. Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon, we are led to believe, was a huge, wonderful, and imposing city, even by today's standards. And it would seem that the majority appear to have done quite well! In fact, some of the Captives in Babylon reached very high positions of state *e.g.* the Prophet Daniel, and Nehemiah, who became 'Cupbearer to the King'. Fortunately, during their sojourn in Babylon, the Jewish people were allowed to retain their Priests, Prophets and teachers. Thus they were able to preserve their Faith in the 'One True and Living God, M. H.'

In order to maintain their national identity, the 'Jews in Exile' built a number of 'Club Houses' or Lodges. They called them "Beth Hakneseth, meaning 'house of gathering', or in Greek, 'Synagogue' (meaning the same). Next to these Lodges, they built an annexe where the scholars partook of some light refreshments, before returning to their homes. Thus has originated the present day 'Lodge and the South'.

Eventually, the 70 years Exile, "as was foretold by the mouth of the Prophet Jeremiah" was coming to an end. Young King Cyrus, of the Medes and Persians had been steadily annexing one country after another, and had thus established the foundation of his 'Persian Empire'. Cyrus was now ready for the fight against the Chaldeans.

In the year 539 BCE, Cyrus began his march against Babylon. Babylonia at that period of history was ruled by an old king named Nabonidus, and as the king was in a very poor state of health, he appointed his son, Belshazzar, as co-regent.

The city of Babylon was very well fortified. It was also surrounded by a canal (from the Euphrates River.) and you could only enter the city by way of several bridges, these were normally closely guarded, but the Babylonians were over confident of their defences.

One night, after the Babylonians had been feasting and drinking all day, the Persians - under their King 'Cyrus the Great', entered the city, by diverting the waters of the Euphrates river drying out the canal, and thus forming a passage under the city walls. The Persians then captured the city of Babylon in what was virtually a bloodless victory. So, in the fateful year of 539 BCE, Cyrus became the Emperor of 'The Great Persian Empire' (incorporating the beautiful city of Babylon).

To the astonishment of the conquered city-dwellers, there was no mass slaughter of the inhabitants; no one was marched off into captivity! Even the pagan gods of the Babylonians, were not disturbed! Cyrus exalted himself as a ruler of great tolerance; He allowed ALL the people of his great Empire to enjoy complete freedom of religious - worship. In previous conquests of the then-known world, people were subdued, rather than governed. Cyrus brought a complete contrast! His vision was for a commonwealth of self-governing-dominions', where free trade, and the advantages of peace, would benefit ALL, from the lowliest slave,

to the benevolent Emperor. This could be taken as the first idea of government rather than the suppression of a subject people!

Cyrus then issued his famous DECREE, that all the people were free to return to their homeland, if they so desired. Thus, in the year 538 BCE, the forced captivity of the Jewish people came to an end. The people of Judah, in 'Exile in Babylon', were NOT destined to the fate and obscurity, of the other "Ten lost Tribes of Israel".

And so this 'Historical Preamble', brings us to the time in history, where the 1st Point of our Red Cross Knight Degree is placed!

Cyrus appointed Sheshbazzar a Prince of Judah to be the new Governor, in Judah. He was to supervise the mass migration of the Jews from Babylon back to Jerusalem. Cyrus also gave back most of their 'sacred vessels' and relics belonging to the former Temple, which had been confiscated by Nebuchadnezzar. Sheshbazzar in turn appointed two other 'Leaders'. One was Zerubbabel, who was also a 'Prince of Judah'. He was a direct descendant of the 'House of David', and the nephew of Sheshbazzar! The other was Jeshua, the new High Priest, son of Jehozadak and grandson of the last High Priest who served in the Temple of Solomon prior to its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar. Jeshua was also a direct descendant of Aaron, the 1st High Priest, (& brother of Moses). These two were also greatly assisted by 'Haggai the Prophet', a little later on.

*Reviewers Note: In the ritual used by the USGC of NSW & ACT Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel are considered to be the same person.*

Some 42,360 people went back to Jerusalem with the '1st Return'. Most of these were the direct descendants of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, and the Levites or Priests. Another large group returned many years later, under Ezra, who also brought with him the last of the Holy vessels from King Solomon's Temple.

(If you will have a look at the 'Family-tree' which you received, down near the bottom you will notice that I indicate, that Shenazzar and Sheshbazzar are thought by many, to be one and the same person!, in which case, Sheshbazzar (an older man), would be Zerubbabel's uncle.)

Note: My research seems to indicate that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel both went back with the 1st Return', and that Sheshbazzar was the Governor, and Zerubbabel was under him. Then, after approximately 10 years, Sheshbazzar died, the local Persian administrators were causing hold-ups, so Zerubbabel returned to Babylon for assistance from the King. Some years later, Zerubbabel returned to Jerusalem this time as Governor.

*Reviewers Note: The 'Family-tree' mentioned above is not available with this paper.*

So, late in 538 BCE, at the end of the 70 years in Exile in Babylonia, Zerubbabel and Jeshua led the first mass migration, all the way back to Jerusalem, as described in 'the Recitative'. Thus, the Keynote of the 1st Point, (or Knight of the Sword) is FREEDOM for the people of Judah, on being released

from their Babylonian bondage. Hence, the P.W. of this Degree is L-b-r-t-s, in Hebrew Hep-h-sh-a, meaning Liberty or Freedom.

(It is interesting to note that at this point, the candidate (representing Zerubbabel) is armed with a sword, which belonged to his former King Jehoiakim, when he was taken prisoner in Judah.)

So how far was it, from Babylon to Jerusalem? The distance, straight across the waterless Arabian Desert, is 580 miles (or 970 Km.) as-the-crow-flies. But by way of the cooler caravan trails, at the foot of the mountains to the North, (the only practical course for a large party), it was about 800 miles! This was the same route that Abraham took 1400yrs earlier! So there were rivers to cross, and hostile country, and robbers to fight, on this journey, as well as the relative comforts of some of the larger towns, such as Tadmor, and Damascus, up near Lebanon. SO, after having fought-off a detachment of Assyrians, at the bridge over the Euphrates, (who were tempted by the large number, of vessels of pure gold, which the Jews were carrying), Zerubbabel and his weary followers arrived back at Jerusalem, on the 22nd day of June, 537 BCE. The journey had taken them six months! What then is the import of this First Point?

Our History tells us, that when Cyrus offered liberty, to the 'people of the Exile', a fair number of the people took up the offer, and, taking with them the Holy Vessels from the destroyed Temple, made the long return journey to Jerusalem. Most, if not all of them, had been born and raised in Babylon the greatest city in the known world yet they were prepared to forsake the comforts of their established life-style, in order to fulfil the hopes and aspirations of the Priests and Prophets of their 'special' religion, and to 'rebuild' in (what was to them) a foreign land which, they had been led to believe, was the true place of worship, for their One-True-and-Living-God-M.H.. The ZEAL, COURAGE, and FIDELITY shown by them, in undertaking this monumental task, should be an example to us all!

At last, they came in full view of the Holy City! Then they stood before the ruins of the Temple. They were grief-stricken. Jerusalem had become a desolate city. Even more desolate were the people left behind by the conquerors! These people had inter-married with the foreign pagan element, and had been colonized by the Assyrians and Babylonians. Among these were the Samaritans, who, although they considered themselves as Jews, were, nevertheless, not accepted by Zerubbabel, as equals, and were not permitted to take part in rebuilding the 'Temple to the M.H'. Therefore, a couple of years later, the Samaritans resorted to cruel tactics; not being able to stop or hinder the progress by brute force, they indulged in blackmail. They wrote letters to the Emperor in Babylon, accusing the Jews of preparing a REVOLT against the Ruler of the Great Persian Empire!

Meanwhile, starting in October, of 537 BCE, Zerubbabel and Jeshua superintended the rebuilding of the 'Altar of the Temple', on the same rock which had originally been the 'threshing-floor' of Araunah the Jebusite. This 'rock-threshing-floor' and all the area around it, had been bought by King David, and made into an altar, centuries before, and which had eventually

become the main 'Altar of Sacrifice' for Solomon's Temple. The rebuilding of the Altar, was to have been the first step in a 'prompt rebuilding' of the Temple. Then, in the following year, (536 BCE), they started clearing the site for the foundations of the new Temple and it was during this operation, that such an important discovery was made by three men, who had been sojourning in Babylon, and who had arrived at the site, a little late but eager to start work on the "Temple of the Lord".

However, winter was now upon these people, who had been used to a much warmer climate! Tents were not sufficient shelter for the people, who had lived in comfortable houses in Babylon. Just to live in this barren, cold land beset by unfriendly people, was enough! Their enthusiasm waned, in the face of adversity, and many started to build better houses for themselves, in the city. In the meantime, the Samaritan leaders in the area, having heard that there was now a new King on the throne, back in Babylon, wrote to him, advising him that the Jewish people were rebuilding the city and the walls of Jerusalem. They reminded the King that, previous to its capture, Jerusalem had been a powerful city, in its own right! They suggested that if the city was rebuilt, it could become so powerful, as to again demand, that taxes from the peoples in the surrounding areas be paid to them, and not to the King, in Babylon. And not only that, the Jews may not even pay homage to the King, and might even set themselves up in opposition to the King! Naturally, the King wrote to his Administrator, ordering him to put a stop to the rebuilding. The work of rebuilding the Temple was then put on hold',-for about 15 years till 520 BC.

Now, after building his mighty Persian Empire, the reign of 'Cyrus the Great' in Babylon, had been fairly short-lived (539 to 530 BCE) when he was killed in battle. A Pretender to the throne, ruled the empire for a while, until DARIUS, of the Royal House of the Medes, (and hence related to Cyrus), killed the pretender, and suppressed all rebellion.

So in the 2nd Point, (Knight of the East) after an absence of about 16 years, Zerubbabel returned to Babylon to refute the accusations of the Samaritans, and to seek the King's help. The new King, Darius, was at first unsympathetic towards the Jews, he believed the accusations of the Samaritans, but when he realised that he and Zerubbabel had been friends, as boys, he changed his former attitude. And, when Zerubbabel appealed to him for the right to continue the sacred work on the Temple, Darius ordered a search to be made in the ancient archives at Ecbatana for that important Document "The Decree of Cyrus". The Document was found, and thus TRUTH has prevailed. The mischievous accusations of the Samaritans were proved false and Zerubbabel's claim was confirmed!

Now, Darius was endowed with many noble qualities, both of heart and mind, and he invited Zerubbabel to a banquet, where he proposed to his courtiers this question: - "Which is the greatest Wine, Women or the King? Zerubbabel gave this answer: "TRUTH is the greatest, and mighty above all things"! Darius was so impressed with the wisdom of Zerubbabel's answer, that he offered to grant

him any favour, whatsoever so Zerubbabel requested his permission, and financial assistance, in rebuilding the Holy Temple and the Holy City.

Hence the P.W. of the 2nd Point is V-r-tas, in Hebrew.-Em-th, and in English - Truth. What's more Tattenai, the King's Governor (Administrator) in that region, was ordered NOT to interfere "with the House of God, on its site"! and better still, he was told to underwrite the costs of the project, from the Royal Revenues! And so, in the year 520 BCE, the Jewish masons, under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua, and under the protection of Darius the King of Babylon, resumed once more the sacred work of rebuilding the former Temple of Solomon', to the Honour and Glory of the Most High.

Just four years later, (i.e. in 516 BCE), and after a great deal of urging by the Prophet Haggai, the 2nd 'House of God' was finally completed, and duly dedicated, about 70 years after 'The Fall of Jerusalem'. All told, it took Zerubbabel and his people 20 years to rebuild this 2nd Temple! which is often referred to as "The Temple of Zerubbabel".

It could have taken a lot longer to build, but for the way Haggai the Prophet urged them on every time they became discouraged. Just listen to these inspiring words of Haggai: - "SO NOW, BE STRONG O ZERUBBABEL, SON OF SHEALTIEL, DECLARES THE LORD, AND BE STRONG O JESHUA, SON OF JOZADAK THE HIGH PRIEST AND BE STRONG, ALL YOU PEOPLE OF THE LAND!. AND WORK! FOR I AM WITH YOU, SAITH THE LORD ALMIGHTY, AND MY SPIRIT REMAINS AMONG YOU! (Stirring words! aren't they!)

I might mention here that, after the new Temple was completed, we hear nothing further of Zerubbabel; nor is the manner, or time of his death recorded anywhere. But we have reason to believe that he lived to a good old age, because we have no new Governor of Judah appointed until Nehemiah, (about 70 years after the completion of the 2nd Temple).

In the year 465 BCE, (about 50 yrs after the dedication of the New Temple), Artaxerxes the First came to the throne in Babylon. Once again, the remaining Jews in Babylonia, enjoyed complete freedom. During his reign, some of the Jews achieved very high positions of State. Among them was Nehemiah, who was appointed Cupbearer to the King, and later became Governor of Judah. Also around this time (about 458 BCE), Ezra the Scribe came to Jerusalem, and brought another large batch of the Jewish exiles with him. He also brought back the last of the vessels, belonging to the former Temple as well as copies of the TORAH to bring the people back, to the Laws of Moses. Thirteen years later (445 BCE.) Nehemiah invited Ezra to join with him, in dedicating the new walls and gates, which he had built around the Holy City, in record time!

What had happened previously, Bro. Knights, is this. During the period that Nehemiah had been occupied with his duties, as Cupbearer to the King in Babylon, news came him about the unrest, back home in Jerusalem, due to the lack of 'protecting fortifications' around the Holy City ,which were in a very bad state of deterioration. Although the 2nd Temple had been long-since completed, repairs to the walls and gates of Jerusalem, were long overdue! This encouraged the neighbouring Samaritans, Arabs, and Ammonites to make

regular attacks and assaults against the masons, hindering them, and hampering the progress of their work, as they tried to rebuild the walls. Nehemiah appealed to King Artaxerxes (in Babylon) for help. He received permission to proceed to Jerusalem, with ample funds, to carry out the necessary repairs to the walls and thus ensure the full protection of the Jewish people, from the aggression of their enemies. And Nehemiah was promoted to Governor, in the faraway Province, in 445 BCE.

As for the 3rd Point, or 'Knights of the East and West' well, every good story needs a happy ending, and if we turn to the book of Nehemiah in the Old Testament, we will see 'the idea' of the "Knight Masons of Jerusalem" For Nehemiah had no alternative, but to arm his masons and workers. They were forced to work with a sword in one hand, and a trowel in the other. Hence, the W.T's of the 3rd Point, is a Trowel, to commemorate those worthy Craftsmen who were ready to either 'Labour or Fight', in the cause of God as circumstances might require and so should we! The Bible tells us, that the big job, of rebuilding all the huge defence-walls, of Jerusalem, and their massive wooden gates, was then finished in just 52 days pay by working around the clock in shifts an amazing achievement thanks to our brave "Knight Masons of Jerusalem!" And so about 70 years after the 1st Return, the Holy City now had new walls AND a new Temple.

The actual origins of these R.C.K. Degrees seem to be lost in mystery. They are believed to have originated in America, in the latter part of the 18th century possibly from discarded elements of the Royal Arch Degree! The Degree is also related to the 15th, 16th, & 17th, Degrees, of the "Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite" in the U.S.A.

Bro. Knights, I trust that our talk this evening has shown you the 'worth' of the 'Degrees of the Captivity' or 'The Red Cross Knight Degrees' or 'The Babylonish Pass'. For these are all names, by which these Degrees are known! And I sincerely hope that you will see them, NOT as 'playing with wooden swords', but an attempt to bring out the idea, that Zeal, Courage, and Fidelity, are virtues which will help us to overcome all adversity and that TRUTH, is greater, and stronger, than anything else!

And so, to conclude our 'story' for this evening, please listen to this very short Epitaph about 'Cyrus the Great.' the benevolent 'King of the Persian Empire' who offered complete freedom to every nation and people, who came under his control:-

On the southern slopes, of a long range of hills about 30 miles from the city of Shiraz, in Southern Iran (which was formerly Persia), there still stands, among the rough grass of the high-lands, a small, unpretentious building. It is built in the form of 'Stone pavilion' where the body of King Cyrus was laid to rest, after he was killed in battle, in the year 530 BCE. Above the entrance, to this small chamber, could, at one time be read, the following inscription:

O MAN, WHOEVER YOU ARE AND WHENEVER YOU COME FOR I KNOW THAT YOU WILL COME! I AM CYRUS! WHO GAVE THE PERSIANS THEIR EMPIRE!! DO NOT GRUDGE ME, THIS SMALL PATCH OF EARTH... THAT COVERS MY BODY!!"